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March 12, 2025

In support of House Bill 1003

Chairman and Members of the Committee,

My name is Piper Bjornsen, and I am here to share my story as a survivor of human trafficking. Reflecting on my journey, I often compare it to *The Oregon Trail*—a historical game that reminds us of the hardships faced while crossing uncharted territory. My story has been a journey filled with challenges, broken paths, and hard-won survival.

From a young age, I was taught to be seen and not heard. I lacked strong female role models, and my childhood was marked by instability and a revolving door of men in my mother's life. This led to physical and sexual abuse at an early age, which shaped my unhealthy perceptions of relationships and love. I sought love and acceptance like anyone would, but with past sexual trauma and undiagnosed PTSD, I turned to drugs to self-medicate. That path eventually led me into the arms of my trafficker in Williston, North Dakota.

When people hear my story, they often ask, "Why didn't you leave?" It's a difficult question to answer. When I entered "the life," which is another term for human trafficking, I didn't even realize what was happening. Traffickers are experts at manipulation, feeding on insecurities, establishing trust, and saying all the right things. At the time, I felt indebted to him and wanted to please him. It was a dangerous situation, but I survived.

Years later, while serving a prison sentence in North Dakota for crimes stemming from my trafficking situation, I was visited by investigators from the Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BCI) and Homeland Security. They asked questions about my trafficker, whom I had thought of as my boyfriend. Over time, they helped me see the reality of my situation. I became part of a five-year investigation into his crimes and learned I was just one of many victims. When I was released from prison, I testified against him in federal court. He was sentenced to 20 years for trafficking around 30 people in North Dakota and across the nation.

After escaping that life, I faced significant challenges. I had no valid ID, no birth certificate, no credible work history, and no support network. Living in a small, isolated farm town far from Bismarck, I struggled to process what had happened to me. That's when 31:8 Project found me and changed the course of my life.

31:8 Project began regular Zoom meetings with me and helped create a plan to relocate to Bismarck. Finding housing as a felon was incredibly difficult, but they helped me navigate

this challenge with funding through the AG's Human Trafficking Grant to pay my deposit and moving costs. Once I arrived in Bismarck, they provided transportation to food pantries, connected me with donors who helped furnish my apartment, and assisted with building a resume and securing letters of recommendation. With their help, I found a job and transportation to and from work.

Through 31:8 Project, I was also paired with a mentor and joined their bi-weekly support group, which helped me develop skills in money management, coping, and nutrition. They connected me with opportunities to educate others about trafficking, including speaking at conferences like the Bakken Human Trafficking Summit. I've worked alongside BCI, Homeland Security, and other organizations to share my story and help prevent trafficking.

However, life wasn't without its setbacks. Two years ago, I became seriously ill. My history of IV drug use, particularly during my trafficking experience, left me vulnerable to infections. I developed sepsis, and the infection spread to my brain. I had no family nearby, so Stacy from 31:8 Project became my emergency contact. During this time, I had to establish an Advance Directive, and I was terrified. The love and support I received from 31:8 Project during my four-month hospital stay was like nothing I had ever experienced. They also assisted me with paying bills using victim support funds from the AG's Human Trafficking Grant.

Today, I am proud to say I am in a stable place. I have a steady job, secure housing, healthy relationships, and the opportunity to serve as a Lived Experience Expert, educating others about the realities of trafficking. The funds provided to 31:8 Project have been instrumental in my recovery, helping me cover critical medical, living, and other necessary expenses to rebuild my life.

I am just one of many survivors whose lives have been transformed by 31:8 Project. Their support gave me stability, independence, and hope for the future. Thank you for your time and for considering the impact that this funding has on lives like mine. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.